

## The Salem Witchcraft

AS I was in the neighborhood of Salem during my recent journeyings my mind naturally turned to the history of the place. It was once a great seaport and the Essex Museum testifies to its trade with the East Indies. Here are treasures rich and rare in ivory and pearl and curious handiwork of silk and beads and metals. The ancient houses are large and speak of days of wealth and prosperity which have not departed, for though ships no longer start from Salem on voyages around the world, and steam has so largely taken the place of wind in commercial intercourse, the inhabitants of Salem have used their money in other ways and are prosperous and contented. There are no witches there now, and it is hard to believe that such a delusion could ever have swept over so solid and sensible a community as dwelt in this goodly town. Yet, it is just two hundred and five years since nineteen persons were put to death in Salem for witchcraft. The question arises, What is witchcraft? Is it the same thing which is now called hypnotism, the supposed power of one person over the will of another? Or is it mesmerism, in which a person is thrown into a trance and then subjected to another's influence and made obedient to his commands? Was it a sudden and abnormal growth from small beginnings of malice and evil-speaking, which met in Salem a superstitious and morbid condition of the public mind, and spread like a plague or epidemic over the community? As to the general belief of mankind in witchcraft, there is no question. It may be called by different names, and explained on scientific or psychological theories, but its elements of supernaturalism, mystery and unlawful influence, and its connection with occult powers and spiritual beings, places it in the category of witchcraft. The Salem manifestations were crude and coarse and cruel in their outset. Common children, and low-lived persons, and ignorant and irresponsible women broke out with absurd accusations against their neighbors. They uttered fearful cries, and fell in fits, and com-

133.4-A92

## The Salem Witchcraft

AS I was in the neighborhood of Salem during my recent journeyings my mind naturally turned to the history of the place. It was once a great seaport and the Essex Museum testifies to its trade with the East Indies. Here are treasures rich and rare in ivory and pearl and curious handiwork of silk and beads and metals. The ancient houses are large and speak of days of wealth and prosperity which have not departed, for though ships no longer start from Salem on voyages around the world, and steam has so largely taken the place of wind in commercial intercourse, the inhabitants of Salem have used their money in other ways and are prosperous and contented. There are no witches there now, and it is hard to believe that such a delusion could ever have swept over so solid and sensible a community as dwelt in this goodly town. Yet, it is just two hundred and five years since nineteen persons were put to death in Salem for witchcraft. The question arises, What is witchcraft? Is it the same thing which is now called hypnotism, the supposed power of one person over the will of another? Or is it mesmerism, in which a person is thrown into a trance and then subjected to another's influence and made obedient to his commands? Was it a sudden and abnormal growth from small beginnings of malice and evil-speaking, which met in Salem a superstitious and morbid condition of the public mind, and spread like a plague or epidemic over the community? As to the general belief of mankind in witchcraft, there is no question. It may be called by different names, and explained on scientific or psychological theories, but its elements of supernaturalism, mystery and unlawful influence, and its connection with occult powers and spiritual beings, places it in the category of witchcraft. The Salem manifestations were crude and coarse and cruel in their outset. Common children, and low-lived persons, and ignorant and irresponsible women broke out with absurd accusations against their neighbors. They uttered fearful cries, and fell in fits, and com-

133.4-A92



plained of pricking pains and torments, at the same time accusing some of their neighbors or acquaintances of causing these sufferings. Many of the clergy believed that these were instances of demoniac possession like those recorded in the New Testament, but instead of seeking to drive out the devils by prayer and fasting according to the words of Christ, "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting," they accepted the testimony of the "afflicted," and rushed to the belief that the persons possessed of the devil were not tormented by Satan, but by various excellent and often pious people whom these bewitched persons accused. If the Puritan divines had done more humble praying and less arrogant judging, it is likely that the issue would have been different, but haply Christendom would have missed a salutary and permanent lesson. Those nineteen died not in vain. In their death died also the idea of witchcraft as a crime capable of legal punishment, and the modern treatment of the insane in some of its most humane aspects may be traced to the recoil of the human mind from this dire calamity. It has been common to heap condemnation upon the New England clergy for their part in the Salem witchcraft. They, indeed, believed that they were fighting the devil, by seeking to exterminate those who were called witches, but they only voiced the sentiment of the educated people of the community with a few exceptions. Judge Sewall was as able a man in business, and as level-headed in affairs, and as honest in his religion, as any of his contemporaries; and he was one of the seven judges who tried the witches, and sentenced nineteen out of one hundred to death. The court met at Salem in June and August, 1692; the executions took place September 22, by hanging except in one case. Giles Corey refused to plead to the indictment, and according to English law, a man who refused to plead might be pressed to death. His life was pressed out of him by the weight of huge rocks, on a wild moor south of Salem, where the rest were hanged, among them the Rev. George Burroughs, John Willard, John Procter, Martha Currier and George Jacobs. No witch was ever burned in New England, as is so often asserted by ignorant and prejudiced writers, and too often by those who should know better. In Sewall's diary it is written that Cotton Mather was there and four other ministers, that all who were executed protested their innocence, and "Mr. Burroughs by his speech, prayer, protestation of his innocence, did much move unthinking persons which occasions their speaking hardly concerning his being executed."

One or two extracts from court records, copied in a recent biography of Samuel Sewall by Rev. N. H. Chamberlain, and published by De Wolfe, Fisk and Company, in Boston, will suffice to show those who have not read the history of the madness, how it was revealed. This was the examination of a child witch: "How long have you been a witch?" "Ever since I was six years old." "How old are you now?" "Near eight years old; brother Richard says I shall be eight years old in November next." "Who made you a witch?" "My mother; she made me set my hand to a book." "How did you set your hand to it?" "I touched it with my fingers and the book was red; the paper of it was white." She said she had never seen the black man - i. e., the Devil - but she had touched the book and so became the Devil's own, in Andrew Foster's pasture, and that her mother, cousin and aunt among others were there. "What did they

promise to give you?" "A black dog." "Did the dog ever come to you?" "No." "But you saw a cat once; what did that say to you?" "It said it would tear me in pieces if I would not set my hand to the book." She said further her mother baptized her, and the Devil, or "black man," was not there as she saw, and her mother said when she baptized her, "Thou art mine forever and ever. Amen."

Martha Currier, whom this child accused, denied that she had ever seen or dealt with the devil, or hurt any one. She said to the magistrates: "It is a shameful thing that you should mind these folks who are out of their wits." Then, turning to her accusers, who were resting from their fits a little, she said: "You lie! I am wronged." Her courage threw the crowd into an uproar, and the record closes in these words: "The tortures of the afflicted were so great that there was no enduring of it, so that she (Mrs. Currier) was ordered away and to be bound hand and foot with all expedition; the afflicted in the meanwhile almost killed, to the great trouble of all spectators, magistrates and others."

Another witness told the court that the accused admitted that "she had been a witch forty years." Also that she afflicted persons by pinching them, that she went in spirit to her victims, and that her mother carried her to them. When asked "How her mother carried her when she was in prison?" she replied, "She came like a black cat." "How did you know it was your mother?" "The cat told me so, that she was my mother." Captain Alden, son of the Plymouth Pilgrim, who was for thirty years a member of the South church, in Boston, and a brave commander, at the age of seventy years, was thrown into jail for witchcraft. He was confronted with his accusers; "a group of wenches playing juggling tricks," he called them, and he talked to them in pretty thorough "sea language" when they charged him with afflicting, after the manner of witches, people whom he had never seen or known. He was thrown into prison, but managed to escape after fifteen weeks. Those who are curious, can read page after page of mingled nonsense and pathos which these trials evoked, but I have given enough to show upon what slight evidence and by what a mingling of prejudice and superstition innocent people were imprisoned and brought to the gallows, while a whole community seemed to approve.

There is a lesson for us in this strange outbreak. There are definite limits to the human mind in dealing with the spiritual, and when those limits are passed, danger begins. Physical and moral mania and delusion are the certain accompaniments and results of tampering with spiritualism, hypnotism, mesmerism, and all that class of theories and experiments which profess to bring up the dead and to reveal the occult forces of the spirit world. Our asylums are full of such victims; and there is hardly a greater curse upon modern society than the "medium" or the hypnotist. The silly fortune-teller often paves the way for the clairvoyant; and the playful hypnotist of a social evening party leads some of its members to search into mysteries which ruin contentment if they do not dethrone reason. The miracles of our blessed Lord and his dealings with Satan and the devils, glorified God and blessed men. The Salem witchcraft and kindred mysteries cursed men and dishonored God in whose name some of their deeds professed to be done.

AUGUSTUS.